Article

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Call and response in learning, voices for change in teaching: a narrative analysis

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Teaching staff: Andrew Sprake, John Morgan, David Grecic.
NB: The word teacher is used interchangeably referring to the role of university lecturer, denoting common ground for those who teach.

Keywords: *student-voice, Research Informed Teaching, critical reflection and response*

Abstract

This research is prompted by the call from two reflective accounts written by Ethan Williams; *Old People on Screens* and *Musical Chairs*, as stimuli for a number of his fellow degree students to respond to (acknowledged above). Adopting student-voice for both the call and response moves the pedagogical inquiry firmly towards that of Research Informed Teaching, when students become active partners in the research process. When students reflect this deeply on their educational experiences and transform their thinking in to new, rich learning-narratives, it will inevitably cause the teacher who instigated it to reflect on their teaching (and learning) as well. This research, building on previous educational narratives, helps to reveal a cycle of active pedagogical change. This being actioned through meaningful writing about learning, shared in a community who will soon become the teachers and leaders of tomorrow.

Introduction

There are three elements to this research which point to how change in day-to-day classroom teaching may come about through reflective and narrative writing, which are part of the teaching process itself. In brief, by asking undergraduate students to reflect on their recent learning and teaching experiences at school or college, has changed profoundly what I ask them to do now as part of their learning on their degree. (I currently lead on Learning and Teaching modules and Research Methods). First, some underlying reasons for using critical reflection and the storying of experience in education, establishes a student-centred context for this pedagogical approach. This builds upon previous narratives of learning experiences (#58) with similar age degree students in the School of Sport and Health Sciences at UCLan (see Palmer *et al.*, 2016; 2017).

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Second, Ethan's written accounts; *Old people on Screens* and *Musical Chairs* are analysed. These accounts tell us some interesting things about Ethan as a learner currently on his BA Outdoor Adventure Leadership degree, but also, critically, how his experiences were interpreted by his peers on a different degree course, BA Sport and Physical Education, all the same year as Ethan. These peer-interpretations help to build a fuller picture of how Ethan's narratives, and the others supporting this research exercise, strengthen student-voice in the learning process.

Thirdly, there is teacher-reflexivity; adding something of our own story to add to that from Ethan in this case, which is rarely exposed in the presence of student-voice. Students traditionally respond to our questions, not the other way around. This may be for reasons of vulnerability about our role as teachers within an institution and decisions made to facilitate our modules. But, narrative research can burrow deep in to a professional biography, exploring reasons for action or change – change which may have taken place or that may be needed (for some previous attempts of mine, see Palmer, 2010: *Essex Boys can't write*, and Palmer 2010a: *WARNING: If you are interested in teaching PE don't read this – the tale of Wayne Lacey*). For many teachers, it can be valuable to reflect on their own experiences as a leaner, helping to understand the need for change in their practice. The recollection that *'yes, I remember when this happened to me when I was at school 30 years ago'* is one thing, but conceding to the realisation that the issue back then is still an issue now for students, rings alarm bells to me. This signals, given I am the teacher *now*, my personal responsibility to effect positive change in aspects of the education I provide, especially if my actions as a teacher are reinforcing this pejorative status-quo. As a contemporary snapshot in to mainstream education, Ethan drafted these accounts last year, when he was 18 years old, having to reflect back only 2 or 3 years to his High School experiences to answer this task (which was his first formal writing at university: task 1 semester 1). What I take from these stories is I think we have much to learn from our students on how best to teach them. We just have to ask them.

1. Narrative underpinning: stories for change in teaching

A constant challenge of mine in my teaching and research supervision roles is overcoming the naive barrier from some students and staff, that narrative writing (an auto-narrative or a storied account of data) is not 'academic' writing. That is, somehow, not taken seriously. To this I reply that every piece of so-called academic writing out there is a story of one form or another, it is just that some stories are more accessible than others, if you speak their language. And not all of them are right just because they are published, just like this one!

In socio-cultural research, personal stories (data) are analysed and interpreted for a particular audience and communicated in particular ways. It is all 'academic', if that is a useful word at all, as it is all a narrative account of data with inferred

meanings to a given context. Data may be arrived at by various means for whatever purpose; mathematical, musical, astro-physical or theatrical, but they all tell stories. In my line of university teaching; education, pedagogy, coaching theory, etc., it is the *person* who is the focus of my attention, not a maths equation or an electrical circuit, and so my endeavours are to coax students to think differently about how they engage others. I take the view that we don't just visit a teaching style on a class, like some light-beam switched on and off for treatment, rather, we live and stand by what we ask others to do or produce in our role as teachers. Therefore, as we are all living and learning our way through life, a personal reflective account can be a great place to start teaching students who are aspirant teachers and Outdoor Leaders, as pointed out by McAdams (1993:11) in *The stories we live by:*

> If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if *I* want to know myself, to gain insight in to the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story. I must come to see in all its particulars the narrative of the self – the personal myth – that I have tacitly, even unconsciously, composed over the course of my years. It is a story I continue to revise, and tell to myself (and sometimes to others) as I go on living.

Bochner (2001:134-135), discussing the narrative turn, exposes how stories can help to bridge the gap between 'categorical truths' visited upon learners in their subject-driven progress through school, towards the importance of the individual and their personalised, embodied, interpreted understandings of the world around them. This reinforces my own pedagogical stance for making the student the centre of operations and therein, my interest in student-voice to guide my practice:

> The narrative turn moves from a singular, monolithic conception of social science toward a pluralism that promotes multiple forms of representation and research; away from facts and towards meanings; away from master narratives and toward local stories; away from idolising categorical thought and abstracted theory, and towards embracing the values of irony, emotionality, and activism; away from assuming the stance of the disinterested spectator, and towards the posture of a feeling, embodied, and vulnerable observer; away from writing essays and towards telling stories.

McAdams (1993) and Bochner (2001) help to shape a basis for learning through narrative and focussing in upon the individual which is particularly useful in teaching and learning contexts for students in The Outdoors, Sport and Physical Education. However, if narratives are asked for, how might they be used in education and in [undergraduate] research? and as mentioned above, in Research Informed Teaching in particular? (see Jenkins, Healey and Zetter, 2007; Healey and Jenkins, 2009). Encouraging students to become active partners in creating and telling their story in learning may be positive start. Patricia Leavy (2009) in her volume on *Arts-based Research*, gives a useful steer towards creative writing to become the form or medium through which some personal stories of learning experience can be

communicated. This has proved a fruitful tactic with my teaching of first year undergraduates from which the two accounts in this paper, and the #58 preceding them have benefitted (Palmer *et al.,* 2016, 2017). Leavy (2009:27-28) comments:

> Building on the tenets of ethnography, oral history, and qualitative interview, the *narrative method* or *narrative inquiry* attempts to collaboratively access participants' life experiences and engage in a process of storying and restorying in order to reveal multidimensional meanings and present and authentic and compelling rendering of the data. In other words, narratives are constructed out of the data through a reflexive, participatory, and aesthetic process. Research based on narrative inquiry produces arts-based writings. Narrative inquiry often relies on small sample sizes but produces rich case studies.

From this pedagogical stance, since 2016, over 100 first year undergraduates on the Outdoor Adventure Leadership degree alone have responded to my invitation to write creative, stylised, rich description of their learning experiences. In so doing, they have been rehearsing a style of writing and critical analysis which has equipped them well to carry out some highly original research in their degrees at undergraduate and now post-graduate levels.

Marking a start point for this innovation, it is my colleague, Dr David Grecic, who is to be recognised for trialling a request to his PE students, which has yielded such rich and instructive narratives about teaching and learning from the Outdoor students (when I copied it). David explained how (back from about 2012) he asked his PE students to write a short story about their good and bad teaching and learning experiences at school; 500 words on each. Stories could be compared and contrasted for messages on the lines and between the lines, about teaching and learning practices. Brilliant! There seemed much to learn from this simple but revealing task. Interestingly, at the same time, David was flexing his own narrative muscles as a researcher when he started writing stories with me, publishing articles alongside his PhD project in *Coach Education: Epistemological Chaining in Talent Pathways and Skill Acquisition*. Technical stuff. However, it transpired that he is adept storyteller with hitherto untapped skills in storied narrative research, seemingly being able to switch with ease between the two styles… as David explains in his own words (Grecic, 2015:255-256):

> My journey does not just refer to the creation, testing and subsequent iterations of the EC [Epistemological Chain]. It refers to my evolution of thinking in terms of research methodology. Over my past studies I have experimented with more creative, artistic, and fictional representations of data. It is in these areas that I hope to develop my awareness and confidence so that if I were to ever to undertake such a study as the one above [referring to his PhD thesis] I would have the conviction to avoid positivist and reductionist techniques and present a fuller, more vivid representation of an organisation utilising caricatures, images, fictional prose and mediums which stimulate the senses.

Advice to self – next time…
A common phrase in academia and coaching is that we and others 'don't know what we don't know'. Looking back on my research journey I have been reflecting on what advice I would now give to the *me* of 8 years ago. As a coach and teacher I had always been interested in the area of philosophy and beliefs and how they impacted coaching and teaching behaviours, so the guidance I would have given myself should have been about the importance of really knowing and understanding my personal values when it comes to knowledge and learning. I should have said to 'take more time to really appreciate the value of research philosophy and methodology', rather than just skirting over it because it needed to be put in a research application and thesis to be examined. I should then have urged myself to 'seek out kindred spirits' who could nurture this desire. With a greater awareness this would have brought no doubt, I would have been more confident to experiment and innovate much earlier in my journey and this I am sure I would have encouraged and assisted a pragmatic research philosophy and my desire to 'make a difference'!!!

David's titles of this articles reveal a double-life in his academic writing:

Scientific narratives of research reporting in elite sports psychology **PhD Thesis**	**Creative narratives of performance and the lived experience** **David the storyteller**
An investigation into golf coach education and its ability to meet the needs of student coaches (Davies and Grecic, 2012)	*Tales from the tee: narrative accounts of being coached in golf* (Grecic and Palmer, 2013)
A qualitative investigation of elite golf coaches' knowledge and the epistemological chain (Grecic and Collins, 2012)	*You can't buy love at TESCO: observation field notes of a coach education event* (Palmer and Grecic, 2014)
The epistemological chain in action: coaching in high level golf (Grecic, MacNamara and Collins, 2013)	*Back to front coach-learning, a personal reflection on the research journey* (Grecic, 2015)
Pragmatic research in sport: coaching philosophies in action - a values chain to inform practice (Grecic and Grundy, 2016)	*Making sense of skill – a personal narrative of becoming more skilled at skill* (Grecic, 2017)

Whilst David Grecic was telling tales from the tee, looking for love in Tesco's and getting his learning back to front to become more skilled at skill, he shared this narrative exercise with the PE students, and with me. Whilst I was inviting narratives at an individual level, David was inviting them at a cohort level from 30-40 students at a time. I determined to emulate David and shared with my Outdoor students some previous writing from a BA Coaching student, Sarah Nickless, who had written a trilogy of deliciously rich auto-narratives about her learning in school and at university. As an appetiser, her titles include: *Crawling through experience* (2012), *Grandad always said follow your dreams* (2014), and *Education's not black and white – it's vibrant grey* (2015). These were published on the traverse of her degree

through 1st, 2nd and 3rd year. Once narratives started to appear from my Outdoor students, Sarah's articles gave me a means to compare, contrast and analyse their content, towards educational ends (Claxton, 2017) in my Teaching and Learning module. Guy Claxton's (2007) *Learning to Learn* theory has been used as a lens to focus in on the learning and teaching outcomes of the narrative exercise. Claxton's (2007) Seven Dimensions of Learning allow the reader to tease out the pedagogical messages of what may be written in to a story. His dimensions include:

- Changing and Learning
- Critical Curiosity
- Meaning Making
- Creativity
- Resilience
- Strategic Awareness
- Learning Relationships

In essence, Claxton (2007) outlines useful criteria for analysing educational experiences which importantly, are accessible to undergraduates to interpret and judge both process and products from a teaching episode (which they have described). For example, [within a given narrative] was there evidence of creativity and meaning making in that lesson? Was critical curiosity stirred and was the challenge sufficient to develop new learning relationships? If the answer is yes, then all to the good, from which students and indeed staff, might set about questioning to what extent, *how* good, and what changes might be made for the future.

Finding student-voice about learning experiences and following its inferences to appreciate both the teacher and learners' perspectives has been a central to my teaching endeavour. In fact, it is the most powerful aspect of this pedagogy. The key seems to be in the initial request for a story in their own words, no references, no 'academic speak'. The student has to analyse and select what they feel they want to share from their experience, inferring control and self-censorship of the task, which at the same time demands a balanced perspective of reporting 'good' and 'not so good' in their view. This tactic is intended to empower the student to draw on experience that is common to them all – 'schooling' (even home-schooled pupils). Beauchamp (2003:8-9) calls this the bottom-up model, which:

> …take(s) seriously the idea that ethical decisions make use of existing social agreements and practices, insight-producing novel cases, and comparative case analysis as the starting-point from which we commonly make moral decisions.

Building on this ethical autonomy for storying experiences, SoundOut (2002) present a compelling case for the value of listening to student-voice in education, pointing out that 'engaging student-voice may be the most powerful lever available

to improve student learning in schools'. Then, in section 2, after a brief preamble, we move to engage with student voices.

- ***Students learn better when they are engaged partners throughout the educational process*** (Beaudoin, 2005; Dorman and Adams, 2004; Cook-Sather, 2002; Kordalewski, 1999; Newmann, 1992; Wehmeyer and Sands, 1998; Kohn 1993).
- ***Students learn more effectively when taught by peers*** (Batty, Rudduck, and Wilson, 1999; Nelson and Frederick, 1994).
- ***Students learn more from self-and peer-evaluations*** (Kinney, Munroe and Sessions, 2000; Pierce-Picciotto, 1996; Le-Countryman and Schroeder, 1996).
- ***Students are represented more effectively by themselves or their peers*** (Corbett and Wilson, 1995; Fielding and Bragg, 2003; Grace, 1999; Cushman, 2005)
- ***When students plan educational activities their investment, ownership, and consequent learning is greatly increased*** (Corbett and Wilson, 1995; Flutter, 2006; Wehmeyer and Sands, 1998).
- ***Student-led research can pose more effective questions and identifies more useful findings*** (Steinberg and Kincheloe, 1998; Kushman and Shanessey, 1997).

2. Call and response: a student-voice conversation

Setting up a meaningful 'call' Palmer *et al*. (2017) interpreted Lev Vygotsky's learning theory (circa 1920s) which identified a 'sweet spot' for maximal learning; what Vygotsky termed as the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1967). In essence this involves 'stepping out of your comfort zone', a phrase more familiar to teachers, in order to experience the right amount of challenge for learning to take place. To date #60 narratives of learning experiences (#58 in Palmer *et al.*, 2016; 2017 and #2 more here) have been shared from the BA Outdoor Adventure Leadership students in various forms including stories, poems, plays and pictorial accounts about their learning experiences. To garner these revealing accounts, I did not ask them to step out of their comfort zone, rather, I took them straight back in to it, to write in storied forms about experiences they were already familiar with. Easy – on the face of things. However, it is fair to say many underestimated the demanding nature of revisiting some experiences that were painful, annoying or frustrating for them at the time. And equally, the joy of writing about experiences in school that elevated them, made sense and felt valued, with positive relationships emerging, even if the academic result (grade) from that subject was not what was hoped for.

Illustrating the challenges and demanding nature of this style of research writing and recognising it as a credible element of teaching at university, are other student-centred publications in JQRSS. In addition to those cited above, the following titles act as an indicative menu of their contents, all placing the person at the centre of the study for deep, introspective analysis: *The changing man* (Threlfall and Sparkes,

2009), *Doing and representing qualitative research: a human perspective* (Price and Varrall, 2009), *Passing thoughts on watching listening and writing* (Gilbourne, 2011), *Truth or dare: examining the perils, pains and pitfalls of investigative methodologies in sport* (Sugden, 2011), *Senses, sensible or nonsense - one year in and a sense of doubt* (Hughes and Sparkes, 2011), *My life and the beautiful game* (Louis and Palmer, 2013), *Upward skydiving – a journey through data* (Palmer and Hughes, 2011), *(Mis)fortunes of the ignorant* (Edwards and Palmer, 2014) which is a student's critique of Palmer's (2010, 2010a) auto-narratives *Essex boys can't write*, and *If you want to teach PE don't read this*. Then, there is *Cutting grass in the fast lane* (Swales and Palmer, 2015), *Adventure: finding it, exploring, losing it and rekindling it* (Gilliver, 2016), *Getting home* (Edwards and Palmer, 2016) and *Boots and me: an ethno-sensual account of love, dedication and smelly old boots* (Palmer, 2016). Followed by; *In conversation with PE, learning and school* (Keeling, Sprake, Palmer and Palmer, 2017), *Hatch match and dispatch: a creative but nonfictional journey through research methods* (Lee and Palmer, 2018) and *Consuming cricket: an auto-ethnography* (Ewing and Windisch, 2018) which all place personal accounts of learning and identity under the microscope - for personal and public critique. Some readers may respond with empathy for the stories, or disgust, whichever way, these authors have been brave to hold up the mirror to their own lives and share ideas, as in all cases there are messages to heed for the benefit of others. Resonance on the page and in life is a key reason for having their stories in JQRSS.

Setting up a meaningful 'response' to Ethan's narratives were the voices of his contemporaries (at the time of writing), the 2nd Year BA Sport and Physical Education students. It was explained to these students that they were contributing to a growing body of narrative research that is student-centred and pedagogically focussed, as set out above. After being given the option to participate and signing consent forms, they were invited to answer three, open, prompting questions about the two accounts in turn, giving 3 inferences/thought/responses to each.

1. what is the writing about?
*
*
*
2. What does it tell us about the author?
*
*
*
3. What does it tell us about the teaching/schooling/education?
*
*
*

1. Old People on Screens

Sitting and staring into the abyss,
Hoping the darkness would give it a miss.
The white-light projector tried to show,
About something that happened so very long ago.

No colour at all, except for the front of the book,
I tried to concentrate but I really wasn't hooked.
Everyone around me looked dead to the earth,
What were we doing; what was it worth?

I saw old videos of men 'I should know',
But how was that possible, they were born ages ago.
They did not seem happy, but neither were they sad,
A classmate joked that it could be his Dad.

The lights came back on and everyone awoke,
When Miss was talking nobody spoke.
My eyes were on fire, the light burnt them dry,
They felt so parched, they wanted to cry.

The lesson seemed almost over, until,
I looked over and saw we had not had our fill.
The clock hardly moved as the second hand stood still,
She asked me a question, I then felt a chill.

What was I to say? Who had been shot?
A man? A woman? For why? And for what?
I hated the question; I answered, 'Don't know',
People giggled as my knowledge had not grown.

My spelling was awful, my sentences too,
A nice way they put it, was 'they were poo'.
I struggled to read, and I struggled to write,
I wanted to curl up and choose flight not fight.

The past was gone, I did not understand why,
I had to know about it, so I turned a blind eye.
I wanted to know about now and the future,
About tax, about politics and about the computer.

Not migration, revolution and my interpretation,
Not change, or conquest, or church castration!
We were taught the same thing over and over,
My Dad remembered it, and told me I'm a step closer.

The outdated content made me dislike the subject,
With lots of work just boring, useless, or worse, incorrect.
Seconds felt like minutes, and minutes turned into hours,
Then hours into days, weeks, months, and then into years.

Was it ever worth it? My work was satisfactory,
When I look back, I was working in a factory.
Sitting in straight rows, nice and neat,
Raising my hand if I ever wanted to speak.

This was the abyss.

by Ethan Williams

---

3 inferences/thought/responses

1. what is the writing about?

*
*
*

2. What does it tell us about the author?

*
*
*

3. What does it tell us about the teaching/schooling/education?

*
*
*

The open, prompting questions were intended to help the reader put themselves in the shoes of the pupil; Ethan, but also those of the teacher in the context of the situation being described. From these perspectives some interesting pedagogical inferences were made, although fewer responses were given from the 'teacher' perspective. (NB: Text as speech 'xxxx' denote direct quotes from the data).

In response to the poem *Old People on Screens*, all the students understood this was a history class that Ethan struggled to engage with. Many detected that he may have been 'bored' by the video-films of 'people he should know' but struggled to care for in this teaching scenario. But the notion of being bored seems to mask deeper, more worrying trends which the poem also reveals. They comment that Ethan was 'conscious' of his surroundings, many students inferring that he was 'over-conscious', 'uncomfortable' and even 'panicked' by the class. Either way, Ethan was clearly hypersensitive in that particular classroom environment. As a learner, Ethan was clearly not at ease in history. The students detected Ethan was 'on edge', for fear of being 'exposed' for a 'lack of knowledge on the subject'. One student said Ethan was 'a competent bystander, not really taking part in the class, but gets the work done'. This is a very interesting comment, suggesting a pupil who has worked out how to get by in a class he dislikes, preferably unnoticed, not attracting attention to himself. A reasonable inference here is that it may be the teacher and teaching methods that Ethan is wary of and not relating to, not necessarily the subject; history, which can be vibrant, interesting and engaging. The situation for the tacit acceptance of just enough engagement to get by can be a damaging state of affairs in school. Slater (2003:437) referred to this as the 'hidden contract' where both parties; teacher and pupils, agree to rub along, not causing each other too much work, but in return for reasonable grades, a studious picture of concentration and progress will be presented to outsiders such as the Head Teacher if they appear at the classroom door. A downward spiral of low expectation and deluded or false attainment can be the only outcome from this. The history teacher's decision to be constantly showing videos to this class is an indication that this may have been happening.

The notions of 'boredom' and 'lack of enjoyment' leading to concepts of 'escape', and 'not wanting to be there' were alarming for this otherwise exciting subject. One student made the inference that Ethan would rather show 'flight than fight' in his history classes. This utterance could show a degree of empathy for Ethan, a sense of being trapped in his own lesson, conjured up through the 'imagery in his poem'. Perhaps this PE student may have felt similar at times during their school life to make such a comment? Indeed, Hazel Isaacs in her narrative *Please floor, swallow me* shows just this (in Palmer, *et al.*, 2017:77):

> It only took a couple of weeks for the immaculately presented English teacher, Miss Smithson, to suss me out as a straggler. It was like she was some cold-blooded predator and I was the injured wildebeest lagging some way behind the others, her natural target. From my glass prison she would strip me of all my camouflage; my excuses which I clung on to, to hide my inadequacy.

The PE students detected a strong sense of learner-inadequacy in Ethan, responding to his 6th verse 'my spelling was awful, my sentences too'… and like Hazel in the excerpt above, Ethan wished time would pass more quickly to get out of lessons that seemed like an 'abyss'. However, this sense inadequacy may be mis-judged as some of respondents commented on how well the poem was written – a judgement on its form; structure and accessibility, rather than its content or story.

On this note of presentation, one student said they 'detested the poem and did not relate to it at all', while another stated how the 'poem was 'very accessible to read, flowing easily and very engaging' [original emphasis]. This begins to signal how Ethan's natural talents for composing in literature may have been overlooked in his history classes, limiting his scope of expression? To write eleven verses of well-balanced rhyming couplets is a demanding exercise in itself, especially on this difficult and sensitive recollection. Consequently, there is a tension within *Old People on Screens* which is engaging or comfortable in its readability, which cannot have been comfortable experiences for Ethan to revisit. In this regard three PE students discussed how Ethan has been 'brave to communicate his fears' and vulnerabilities as a pupil and 'talented to compose' the poem, but also 'clever' to tell a painful story in such a lulling form.

The majority of PE students responded to Ethan's sense of isolation in his history class, stating that the it lacked 'inclusivity' and that the teacher demonstrated a 'lack of awareness for pupils' struggles' and that the teaching was too 'rigid'. 'Poor differentiation by the teacher to accommodate different learners' needs' may be a reasonable inference from Ethan's account, but we know nothing of the context for this teacher's actions in the classroom. Maybe Ethan was in a disruptive class which rendered the showing of videos as the only possible option to 'do history'. We will never know. However, what we do know is that *Old People on Screens* is a tangible outcome from Ethan's experience of history classes at school, whatever the teacher may have intended. This seems to be what he takes away from that learning experience, even if he did get a grade A in history at GCSE, see JQRSS Author Note.

The PE students observed that Ethan had a 'keen interest on current affairs' and the 'future', not the 'outdated content' of the past. This rebellion from Ethan seems to be a plausible but simplistic way to reject history, given he has to go to classes. Again, it could be inferred that it was the teaching, not the subject, that was the issue as many students commented how the teacher 'does not get everyone involved', or

'the teacher is unable to motivate pupils and get them engaged'. There seems to be a clear message that a different approach may needed in these history classes.

Ethan seems to have suffered and survived in his history classes, not thrived within them. He seems to have cowered behind his desk in hopes of not being asked anything by the teacher, insodoing, subjugating his urge for 'flight' from the classroom, or shouting out to the teacher to find another way to fulfil their duty. By contrast, another of Ethan's peers on BA Outdoor Adventure Leadership, Suzanne Perman, wrote of the same feelings in her class but did shout out in her poem *Hello, can I have your attention?* (in Palmer, *et al.*, 2017:98):

Hello, can I have your attention?

Why can you not see me?
Do you not believe in me?
I can show you,
you just have to look
BANG…
Did that get your attention?
Am I worthy of your attention now?
I wish you could just help me
but it seems not.
unless…
You open your eyes
help people in need
not just the troublemakers
but the ones who sit in class quietly
the ones who cannot put their hand up for help
Because you're dealing with the person, who will not put their phone away
You're dealing with the person, who will not stop talking
You're dealing with the person, who is being disruptive
You're dealing with the person, who does not want to learn
But who is dealing with my education?

Suzanne's question on the closing line of *Hello, can I have your attention*; who is dealing with my education? may shed some light upon Ethan's struggles in *Old People on Screens* and a possible way forward for Ethan in history. Interestingly, we note this is a call and response between like-students in poetry, which nevertheless, highlights the shared duties to get the most from a teaching and learning episode. That is, the teacher and the learner may have duties to adapt to each other's needs so that each may perform to the best of their abilities in the classroom. Both have a duty to deal with their education, if they have a voice and are prepared to listen to each other.

2. Musical Chairs

Huddled around a table like a waddle of penguins trying to keep warm. Sharing our knowledge with each other. Our teacher was like a wise owl – filled with knowledge. Teaching us about music as old as the sixteenth century until the modern day. Filling our ears and bodies with music and smiles.

Sitting in a circle we felt like members of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table. All with the same importance, but with different talents that made us unique; ranging from classical guitar to electric rock guitar, jazz clarinet to singing modern pop songs.

She kept us engaged like a lion being teased by a slow gazelle, we were encouraged by the promise of cake and hot drinks.

The highly decorated walls were covered in posters of pieces of music and of composers; past, present and future. The bright colours mirrored the students' feelings as well as the teacher's opinion of a bright future; bright colourful lessons filled with enjoyment, laughter and fun.

You never wanted to leave the room, it became a second home, where students would practise before school, perform at lunch and nap or compose after school. There was a plethora of genres, and an excess of instruments; bass clarinets, cornets, violins, pianos, double basses, drums, guitars, trombones and saxophones.

The department was a place of inspiration, students past and present; supporting, conversing, suggesting, all working to the same goal – the perfect sound, striving for improvement. No intimidation, despite the ridiculously high levels of ability. Instead, just support and passion.

Everyone dedicated many more hours than to other subjects. The enjoyment of the subject by both student and teacher meant that hours flew by like the migration of birds during the winter. On the surface, we looked effortless and elegant. Behind the scenes, we were working hard, like a new cog trying to fit into its system. Each new piece of information, a new cog to add to make the clock work.

Last lesson on a Friday would always be an endless drag, except when it was Music. We never wanted to leave when it was over. Regularly, we gathered around like a clutch of hungry chicks, open mouthed in the nest, eager to consume everything our teacher could possibly give us, only leaving when we had all we needed to complete our work to the highest standard, getting the best grade for writing the best essay possible.

We would blast out our top notes, all trying to be the loudest, like the elephants in Colonel Hathi's parade in *The Jungle Book*, but always improving as we noticed our own, and other peoples' flaws.

We shared our skills with each other, trying to become more well-rounded musicians, learning intensely about each other's genres, like a bird being told how to fly.

I loved music; it made me relax, it made me feel happy and safe.

I loved my time in that classroom. Sadly, it is gone but its effects will live on for a long time.

Thank you, Music, for making me who I am.

by Ethan Williams

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3 inferences/thought/responses

1. what is the writing about?

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*

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2. What does it tell us about the author?

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*

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3. What does it tell us about the teaching/schooling/education?

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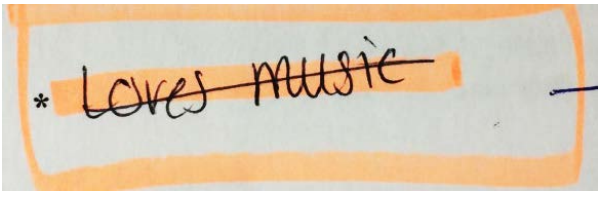
*

In response to the short story *Musical Chairs,* the PE students related to the 'welcoming', 'inclusive' and even 'homely' atmosphere being described by Ethan in this class - Music being his chosen best memories from school. Significantly, the impact of good teaching upon the *person*, i.e. that it is an engaging process which for distinction, may have little to do with the subject itself, can be detected in the opening paragraph when Ethan says, 'Teaching us about music as old as the sixteenth century until the modern day'. The irony seems to be that in Music he has suddenly developed a keen interest in history, because the teaching approaches from the music teacher were in such contrast to that in history (which on Ethan's school timetable may have been just 15 minutes before). The PE students responding to this story were quick to analyse and understand from it that pupils and teachers are partners in the learning process (Wehmeyer and Sands, 1998) and that *evidence* of engagement and harnessing student-voice can help realise high quality teaching. This is a good thing, given these PE students wish to become teachers, one assumes good ones.

The teaching environment was commented upon frequently in the data; 'bright colours', 'posters on the walls' or that it was 'practical and using instruments' which were obvious contrasts to levels of engagement reported in history. Consequently, there is a palpable degree of physical sense-engagement in Ethan's *Musical Chairs*, for example, 'filling their ears and bodies with music and smiles' which signalled to the PE students to observe that 'pupils are in a supportive environment and refer to it as a place of inspiration', and that 'everyone was able to find their own place in the music class'. The notion of *place* indicates how a sense of identity and belonging may have been generated in the music classes where 'it's a second home to him and that he feels safe and happy' or that, 'pupils feel a sense of community in regards to music'. Pedagogically, the warm qualities being described here do not stem from a book on *How To Be A Good Teacher*, in which Chapter 2 is *Satisfying Demands for Curriculum Delivery in the Classroom*. Lessons are not delivered, they are *taught* which is a skilful and highly personalised engagement that another PE student was alluding to when she commented, 'the pupil had a really positive relationship with the teacher which made his attitude towards the subject positive and therefore he really enjoyed the lessons'. This music teacher seems to have projected the idea that her class is somewhere pupils can feel safe, secure, 'not intimidated', where you can 'enjoy being creative' and where, importantly, 'they felt valued in music'. Music was something to be anticipated, looked forward to and savoured, it was a beacon of hope amidst a sea of lessons which by comparison were 'an endless drag'. It is worth pointing out that the main protagonists to broadcast these positive vibes were the **pupils themselves.** That is, there will have been few other teachers across that school to experience these music classes, who would be unlikely anyway to send messages of hope and joy to pupils in another subject or department… student-voice may be all the more persuasive when learners are talking to learners.

A very interesting feature within the data was how one PE student wrote how Ethan 'loves music' which was her initial judgement, but her entry was soon converted to '~~loves music~~'.



On reflection, the PE student explained that it is clear Ethan loves his music lessons, but does he actually love music? Does he play anything? Her analysis of the story revealed that we don't know if Ethan is any good at playing an instrument 'despite the ridiculously high levels of ability' that he reports, which may have been from others in the class. We can presume that he was able to join in the ensemble described as 'a plethora of instruments' with a degree of competence and confidence, however, we don't know if he played an instrument to an accomplished level. This may be tangential to the pedagogical discussion in hand, but is relevant to another student-voice, James Gilbert, a former BA Outdoor Adventure Leadership student, who wrote *A bum note from Mr Buckley* (in Palmer, *et al.*, 2016:90) about his disastrous music lessons. The point being, that James was an accomplished player on several instruments, he was composing and performing his music and the much anticipated highlight of his education at school was going to be GCSE Music. Mr Buckley had a shining talent in his class, but seemingly did little to nurture it:

> Now, I don't know what changed, but a week before we were due to sit our music exam Buckley sat us down and said it was time to teach us the theory side of the GCSE. Better late than never I guess. Needless to say one week was nowhere near enough time to learn and memorise two years of music theory. As you can imagine every single person on the Music GCSE failed the exam. I scored the highest overall grade, a C, even though my compositions had me set up to gain A*. I knew I'd flunked the exam and any chance I had at getting a decent grade in Music, but some foolish part of me hoped I'd do well. In the end, with the grade I got and the experience I had with Mr Buckley, I was done with music. Something I had enjoyed throughout my life and I had hoped to continue into College had all been destroyed by my music 'teacher'. Now before you get all high and mighty, of course I could have been using my own time to study and learn music theory, but hey, I was 16, I still thought everything in the world would be explained to me by my teachers. I mean, it is their job.

I think James was right to expect better management of his learning from his teacher, it is 'their job'. And by contrast, while Ethan was probably not in James' league as a musician, Ethan clearly got the better deal in terms of a quality learning and teaching experience in the same subject at High School. It is the teaching which made the difference, not the talents already honed beforehand.

'Passion'. Passion was the word chosen by the majority of the PE students to describe the qualities they saw in the teacher and in Ethan from his short story. This is interesting as Ethan used the word only once: 'just support and passion', however the PE students used it 35 times in their responses. One student observed that 'the teacher enjoyed it as much as the students' which again, reinforces the notion of partnership within a good educational relationship. Ethan captures the excitement and passion for the music class using 'similes', 'metaphor's and 'analogies' to create imagery of their class and excitement for it – one student analysing the text, counting these literacy devices to communicate the sense of 'fun', 'commitment', and indeed the 'passion' for various aspects of learning in *Musical Chairs*.

These rich descriptions of the learning experience may be linked to a final and important piece of the jigsaw that the PE students noted, and that was of 'teaching style'. Eleven of the PE students noted how *Musical Chairs* showed a 'democratic' teaching style with lots of 'group discussions' - by the teacher's design it was not an autocratic or didactic experience. The pupils were allowed some 'freedom to explore their ideas' in group work that 'allowed each person to contribute equally'. Which chimes again with an 'inclusive learning environment'. High engagement and voices being heard to 'shape positive memories' of learning may be the most formative memory for Ethan as he prepares to become and Outdoor Leader. About the impact of this 'teaching style', which happened to be in music, one PE student commented, 'although the author may not have had high ability in regards to music, it still taught the author the values of music which has clearly impacted on the author to the present day'. That is, the memory of the teaching lives on, just as when anyone asks someone to recall who their favourite teacher was, they have an immediate answer, but rarely is their recollection about curriculum content or the specific questions on an exam paper. Their story is about the person, the teacher. On a similar note, Ethan ends his story, showing how the memory of the joyful and productive music lessons made their mark, which may shape his ideas of 'how to be a good teacher' in the future (which is a whole lot more than just delivering content).

> I loved music; it made me relax, it made me feel happy and safe.
>
> I loved my time in that classroom. Sadly, it is gone but its effects will live on for a long time.
>
> Thank you, Music, for making me who I am.

3. Teacher resonance with Ethan's writing: reflexive notes from Clive

After a career in the Royal Air Force, I qualified as a Secondary School teacher in 1994, working in Further Education until 2000, when I moved in to Higher Education. In those early days of teaching, I understood that a university assignment should be well-structured; a predictable layout married with a forecast of predictable content, comprehensively supported with literature that was clinically referenced using the Harvard Reference system. Frequently, it was the quality of the referencing alone, being a measure of academic standards as I saw it, that swayed the final mark. Notwithstanding SPaG (Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar) I concede now that what the student actually said in the assignment was of marginal interest. What a shambolic waste of their efforts. Their response would be predictable because the assignment request, or the title set, was also predictable. Needless to say, I learned fairly quickly to change things when I started to manage my own modules.

Skipping forwards twenty years, the two narratives above, and those in Palmer *et al.,* (2016; 2017) are current responses to my invitation for free-writing from the students, presented in whatever form they might choose: prose, poetry, plays or art. I expected in return, polished, personalised, readable text. They could select what they wrote about and decide their own titles. This has elicited unpredictable content which I read very closely, and having gained their trust to write for me in this way, I cannot help but find considerable resonance with many of their experiences as learners. Compared to my early days in teaching, one discernible measure of quality may the reader's response to the message. That is, as their teacher, I look forward to marking their work now because of what they have to say about teaching and learning. It makes me think. It moves me. It makes me reflect back. It teaches me and it makes me evaluate the task moving forwards. Ethan's stories are no exception to this and with the PE students having had their opportunity to respond and share their view, there is an element in the poem, *Old People on Screens* which really has made me think. To validate the task, I have a duty to react in this way – publically.

Also, it should be born in mind that teachers, especially in Higher Education, generally respond to a student's assignment with some feedback and a grade; their *Assessment*. However, in this particular task (eliciting the narratives), no grades were given, only written and verbal feedback. The work by Wiliam (2009) makes it clear how a grade or percentage can override the impact of any written feedback, so formative assessment is given throughout the year on this module, until the Exam Boards require a summative grade in their spreadsheets. I remind my students that, 'numbers don't tell you how good your work is - I do' So, Ethan wrote what he did, honestly, with freedom and enjoyment for what he wanted to say about learning in a personal context. Furthermore, with so many examples to follow for this individualised task, there was no lack of structure, it just needed a good story to tell.

Excerpt from the poem: *Old People on Screens*: verse 11 (last verse)

Was it ever worth it? My work was satisfactory,
When I look back, I was working in a factory.
Sitting in straight rows, nice and neat,
Raising my hand if I ever wanted to speak.

This is me, in 1986, at Royal Air Force Abingdon near Oxford, making a fuselage repair for a Harrier GR5 (Ground Reconnaissance mark 5). The Harrier was also known as the 'Jump Jet' which could do vertical take-offs. The problem was that when the pilot did do a vertical take-off, the vibration was so intense it was shaking the whole plane apart. The plate I am making is designed to reinforce where the massive vertical tail fin is fixed into the bottom of the rear fuselage. If the tail fin, at some 8 metres high, experiences any movement whatsoever, at what is essentially the fulcrum, it translates in to a violent wagging about at the top by up to 20-30 centimetres. This is not good if the pilot wishes for his tail section to stay attached to his plane. At the time, 90% of the Harrier fleet in the RAF was grounded or restricted to more gentle rolling take offs, for fear of bits falling off.

The story for the Red Arrows was only slightly better in that I made a butt-strap leading edge repair for them almost every week for 6 years. This helped to reinforce the front of the wing. This was needed because they flew their planes so hard, the Hawk, that the wings were cracking. Again, not a great state of affairs but, we did our very best to keep them up in the air. Looking back what I was doing was a highly specialised job, handcrafting segments of airframe to micro-millimetres of accuracy. I made parts for every aircraft in the RAF from Spitfires to Lancaster, VC10s, Hercules, Tornados, Lightning fighters, and many more. The line manager, Tony, when I started at RAF Abingdon was superb making us feel special for the work we did. He gave us so much confidence to try new things that we knew would be frowned upon elsewhere in industry. However, Tony knew we were the RAF's last hope of getting an aircraft flying again for the parts we would supply. His strength as a teacher was making us feel confident and capable to produce these bespoke, one-off airframe components – that is, we were his strength and I think he realised it. He needed us to experiment. With a relaxed and engaging smile he'd say [in a strong Liverpool accent]:

'Hey kid, you are the end of the line.
This job has come to us because no-one else in the country can make it.
So, if you can't make this thing, … there is no-one else who can,
so just give it a go.
Whatever you do, it can't be wrong'.

There are so many stories, but, it was regular work - 8.00am till 5.00pm.

It is the second line of Ethan's verse *When I look back, I was working in a factory*, that has made me reflect in this way, because, I was actually working in a factory environment back then, and similarly made to feel like it, which became depressing. In the picture I am just 20 years old, about the same age as Ethan is now - and when he wrote his poem. Back in the RAF, there was a change of line-manager in the workshop which resulted in my work not being valued in the same way, which meant I felt devalued. I was treated like a machine, along with four others on the shop floor, who it was assumed could just magically produce these very expensive components from flat pieces of sheet metal. It wasn't magic, they were talented people and those guys were *really good* at their craft. You did not survive in this particular role if you weren't. Weaker ones were given menial jobs, like paperwork in the office, to keep them out of the way. Suffice to say, I used to get the more difficult jobs that came in to be made – I was good at my job. What I used to feel so proud of became subject to, 'do it quicker', 'great, here's the next one', 'that's not really good enough' - there was no praise for this very difficult work. 'We can't afford another failure from you, how long now?', 'make another 5 of those by the end of the week'. I was pouring my heart out to do my best in this demanding job and getting so little back. Yes, I was working in a factory and I determined to leave.

I wanted to go somewhere where I might feel more valued, where I might make a difference and work with people, not bashing bits of metal for the rest of my life, especially with no recognition for my skills. So I decided to become a teacher.

In 1990 I bought myself out of the RAF and embarked on Initial Teacher Training, escaping the RAF for precisely the same reason that Ethan states he endured at school. Back then I genuinely wanted to make a difference, and I still do, which is why I am writing this. It leaves me feeling somewhat hollow that 30 years on in my career in education, some teachers are still managing to create conditions in their classrooms that makes their pupils feel like they are factory workers. This fuels my determination to make a difference in teaching, as the picture that Ethan paints in *Old People on Screens* could stay with him for the rest of his life, were it not for the opportunity to tell us about *Musical Chairs*.

Conclusion

From the initial idea of 'call and response' between Ethan and the second year PE students, it is revealed there are many voices involved in this particular narrative of learning. The analysis shows that while Ethan's accounts are the prompt for this discussion, they are not the start or the end. However, stemming from the opportunity to write in this way, Ethan's learning now sits within a wider tapestry of pedagogical actions that are truly learner and teacher centred. For Ethan, being able to write in this way, in terms of opportunity, comes about from my copying and adapting the teaching ideas of my colleague, David Grecic, who was simultaneously shaping his ideas for his own research writing in a narrative and storied manner. Then there are the voices of the theorists who help to establish a case for how we might learn from our experiences once they are reported in such personal and engaging ways. Thus, Ethan's poem and short story stands on the shoulders of numerous others' learning narratives, from #30 BA Outdoor Adventure Leadership students in previous years (and others such as Sarah Nickless). Some Outdoor students' voices echoing in to this story to resonate with Ethan's educational experiences helping to demonstrate that Ethan is not alone in his trials and joys of negotiating the education system.

The second year PE students then added valuable commentary through their data, helping to build a fuller picture of learning. That is, they were analysing Ethan's accounts from both teacher and learner perspectives, adding texture and insight to not only Ethan's account of learning, but also their own as trainee teachers. They may have been taking messages from Ethan's writing in a similar way to which I have been doing in my own teaching, which brings me to me. Ethan's comment on working in a factory took me back and forwards at the same time, causing me to reflect on some emotions and reasons for leaving the Royal Air Force. But also, it prompted me to become reflexive about the actual writing I asked for from Ethan and his peers.

I like to think I ask my students to engage in meaningful writing opportunities. The fact that I have a personal reaction to what Ethan wrote, which is in response to the opportunity I created, may be a measure of its worth as an exercise in learning. This new situation makes me reflect upon the 1000s of assignments that I have set, or been a party to through team teaching, which were relatively meaningless for the students, and provoking no reaction from me… other than a grade.

I think David Grecic, myself, Ethan and the second year PE students have all been actively experimenting within our teaching and learning through sharing and partnership. It is a pedagogy of sharing experience in one form or another, whether in a journal article such as this, in a lesson with peers, or alone with a book – just you and the author, or even from old video films, by whichever means, we assimilate the wisdom from others in to our practice selectively. Towards the narrative turn, Frank (2009, cited in Gunaratnam 2009:55) points out that 'stories function to help people gain a sense of agency and responsibility in their lives'. By writing *Old People on Screens* and *Musical Chairs*, Ethan now has agency and responsibility as an active learner (just like me).

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JQRSS Author Profile

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Reviewer Comments

This is a thought-provoking paper which draws on two reflective accounts of experiences at school, written by Ethan Williams. In response to Ethan, a group of undergraduate students, who are hoping to become Physical Education teachers themselves, are asked for their thoughts on the impact of the learning environments which Ethan describes. Through this, they have gained a better understanding of how a pupil might respond to the environment created by a teacher. The paper highlights that the use of creative writing as a means for expressing 'pupil voice' is a powerful tool for teachers, providing a more accurate reflection of pupils' feelings towards the curriculum, than questionnaires or generic feedback sheets might do, which are commonly used in research. The paper has relevance for all parties within a school environment; school leaders and teachers. Having taught for over thirty five years, the two accounts made me reflect on how pupils perceived my teaching. From this, teachers will see the benefits of providing a supportive environment, whilst also realising that 'the teacher and learner have to adapt' to create that environment.